DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 332 CS 203 836

AUTHOR Becker, Lee B.
TITLE Empirical Measures of Press Performance.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (60th, Madison, Wisconsin, August 21-24, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Broadcast Industry; *Evaluation Methods; Information Dissemination; Journalism; *Mass Media; *News Media; Newspapers; *News Writing; *Performance Criteria; Performance Specifications; Press Opinion; *Standards

ABSTRACT

This speech advocates the establishment of empirical standards for evaluating the success or failure of press performance. The ideal measure, as outlined in the speech, includes information on specific news coverage, the daily operation of the press, and the media institution's past performance. This information should be precisely gathered and assembled, and comparisons to global situations should be applied wherever possible. For a complete theory of press criticism, certain independent variables, both from the community in which the press institution operates and from within the media organization itself, must also be considered. (MAI)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED149332

# Empirical Measures of Press Performance

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lee B. Becker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Lee B. Becker

Communications Research Center

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Syracuse University

Prepared for "Judging the Press: An Update," a panel discussion sponsored by the Newspaper Division of the Association for Education in Journalism, Madison, Wisconsin, August 1977.

CS203836

Empirical Measures of Press Performance

The belief that it is possible to empirically measure press performance is not, to be sure, universally held. The press product is complex, covering a multitude of topics and including many types of content. Evaluating that product in terms of community wants and needs as well as accepted professional standards often seems insuperably difficult. Yet the benefits resulting from such measurement argue strongly for attempts at overcoming the problems.

The goal of media criticism, in my view, is not merely to identify media failings after the fact or serve as a referee for complaints against news operations. There is considerable value in such activity, to be sure. My view is that some of the media will improve as a result of such criticism.

It seems to me, however, that the real goal of press criticism is--or at least ought to be--to understand why the press fails and why it succeeds. In other words, press criticism ought to lead to a better understanding of press behavior. By evaluating the press, we ought to come closer to understanding what it is that makes one newspaper or one broadcast news operation better than another. Press criticism ought to help us understand why the press seems to perform better in some situations or in covering certain kinds of stories than in others.

To put it another way, I think we need theories which specify how the press behaves or performs. Such theories ought to specify which factors influence press behavior and the ways in which such factors interact. Theories

of this sort would be based on the present and the past. But they would help us predict. And they would allow us to specify what can be done to improve the press in the future.

Theories, of course, are built upon observation. They are generalizations from that observation. And they are verified by observation. So a theory of press performance, quite simply, requires observation of press performance.

That doesn't mean, however, that measurement--the classification of performance according to some criterion--is necessarily a part of theory construction and evaluation. It is possible to have observation without measurement. In the strict sense of the term, in other words, it is possible to be empirical without employing measurement. Measurement, or classification, of performance isn't an essential part of theories of press behavior. Only observation is essential.

It is in the rejection of measurement of social phenomena per se that rejection of empiricism in studying press behavior finds its most solid defense. In other words, those who would argue that media behavior is immune to measurement must also argue, to be consistent, that the performance of other social institutions cannot be measured. Rejection of measurement of press performance seems to require, in my view, a similar rejection of sociological measurement in general. And unless some crucial distinction is made between social and psychological measures, such a rejection of measurement of press behavior also seems to argue for rejection of measurement of social behavior in general.

Many, of course, take just such a position. Proponents of a qualitative methodology, for example, argue that measurement in and of itself distorts social reality (Filstead, 1970). Social researchers using empirical measures do not really observe the world about them, qualitative methodologists argue. They create a world in keeping with their measurement techniques. Absolutists argue that no measurement of social phenomena is possible.

While I'm sympathetic to the criticism of some sociological and psychological measures, I reject the notion that measurement is inappropriate. I suspect that many of those who feel uncomfortable with empirical measures of press performance reject the notion as well.

There is, of course, a long tradition of empirical study of press performance under the rubric of bias research. Studies of news play in the coverage of national elections, for example, were conducted as early as 1952 (Stempel, 1975). They now seem to be a fairly standard part of election year research programs.

In organizational research, in sociology and management, where performance is defined as the composit goal-directed output of a group, empirical measurement also is the norm (Wofford, Gerloff and Cummins, 1977). Performance of business ventures, of course, are regularly assessed in terms of the financial stability they acquire through product output.

These two research examples--of bias in political news and of organizational output--represent two general strategies in measuring the performance of complex organizations. The first strategy is to examine specific organizational output at a given point in time--perhaps after some crucial change in the environment of the organization. In media research, this often means examining

coverage of a specific event--such as an election or an element of the election--at a precise point in time. The second strategy is more global. An attempt is made in such analyses to assess overall performance of the organization, not just performance in one specific area at one particular time.

Global indices, of course, can be based on a set of specific measures. In newspaper performance analysis, for example, it would be possible to create a global measure of a newspaper's performance based on observations of how that paper covered a variety of specific stories or story topics. A story on local government, one on urban problems and another sports piece are only a few of the many possibilities. For the most part, however, this strategy has not been employed in newspaper performance analysis.

Perhaps the most obvious problem encountered in performance analysis using a specific measure-- or a global measure based on specific observations--has to do with sampling. Any specific story or area chosen is but one of the many pieces of output of a news organization. Campaign news, in the case of much of the bias research, is only a fraction of the news produced by the press during an election period. An evaluation of the whole media institution on the basis of the selected output is tenuous at best.

Researchers employing specific measures, of course, are usually quite willing to admit that their measure may not adequately reflect the overall performance of the news institution. The problem, however, is that, because they have focused only on one kind of output, they are not able to specify what it is about news media behavior which produces excellence in one area while not necessarily in another. In other words, they can't provide much information which allows for an assessment of the link between one kind of performance and another. The question of general performance as a consequence remains quite a mystery.

A particular problem of specific measures of press performance entailing a judgment of bias also is worth noting. As Rosengren (1977) has noted, bias measures per se are lacking in a relevant standard of comparison. As a result, researchers must be aware of the possibility that the news event is, in reality, biased. On any given day in a political campaign, for example, one candidate may in reality have done more and said more than another. Balanced news coverage of the campaign, measured solely in terms of inches devoted to the two candidates, would be an inferior measure of performance--unless equality itself is the sole goal.

Global measures of performance, of course, are not without their problems. Those which are not based on observations of performance in specific tasks run the risk of measuring something quite distinct from actual present performance. They may measure instead simple reputation or some other aspect of prestige. Those which are based on specific observations, as noted, encounter problems of representative sampling in making those observations.

A recent example of a global measure of performance will serve to illustrate the first problem. It should be noted, however, that the researchers who used this measure--Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman (1976)--did not consider it a measure of performance, but rather of prestige or prominence of the news organization. There is a relationship between this measure of prominence and performance, I think most will agree, and others might prefer to think of it in performance terms.

I'm referring, of course, to the national study of newspeople conducted in 1971 by the National Opinion Research Center under the direction of the three cited sociologists at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. Included in the study was a question soliciting from respondents their nominations for

the three newspapers or other news organizations which they considered to be fairest and most reliable. It will surprise few of you to learn that the New York Times topped the list with the most nominations. It was followed, in order, by the Associated Press, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal and the United Press International. The list will surprise few of you, I suspect, because you have other evidence these are some of the best news organizations in the country. But they also have other characteristics. They are large. They are eastern. And they are the same five news organizations which the journalists said they relied on in their work. In other words, the Johnstone, et al., question seems to measure performance. But it also measures other things. Unspecified global measures generally have that characteristic.

Perhaps the most creative recent attempt at employing global measures for media institutions can be found in the published product of the New England Daily Newspaper Survey project (Ghiglione, 1973). The measures are worth examining in some detail because they lack the common drawbacks of most unspecified global measures, yet they seem to overcome the problems of sampling associated with global indices based on specific behavior.

The measures I'm speaking of are included in the evaluative essays evaluators wrote about the 100 plus New England dailies. The evaluators didn't assign numbers to the newspapers or give them a performance score, though they could have. But they did measure the papers in terms of selected criteria. A separate content analysis of these essays by two of my students and myself has produced a set of scores for these papers (Becker, Beam and Russial, 1978). I reported to this division on the reliability of these measures and the use we made of them in our secondary analyses a year ago.

The New England Survey evaluators discussed their task at some length before its undertaking. They debated the question of relevant criteria of performance and considered various alternatives. The essays they wrote indicate they hadn't reached complete consensus. But our content analysis of the essays showed each evaluator discussed the following aspects of press performance.

1. The existence of various kinds of news in the newspaper. Specifically, the evaluators looked for such things as routine coverage of meetings and offical government activity, initiative or investigative pieces, stories providing local perspective on state, national or international events, and stories of particular interest to minority groups. The observations were based on examination of the issues of the newspaper for a six-week period.

2. The thoroughness or depth of these stories. Some of the copy provided few details on important matters. Other coverage was more substantial.

3. The presentation of the news. Evaluators examined the photography, typography and editing of the paper. They examined headlines to see if they matched the stories under them. They also tried to assess quality or writing in general.

4. The editorial page. Evaluators commented on the amount of editorial space devoted to local, state and national issues, giving particular attention to the use of "canned" or nonlocally written editorials. The evaluators also looked for balance in the use of columnists and other editorial materials.

In addition to these four areas, evaluators tried to assess the integrity of the news operation. In doing this, they sometimes used data not obtainable from the content analysis itself. For example, they talked when possible with staffers on the papers to learn how frequently copy was influenced by management. But they also did something quite simple. They looked for puff pieces

in the papers themselves. This was concrete evidence the paper did or did not write copy to suit advertisers or other local interests.

What is particularly striking about the New England analysis, it seems to me, is how much information on press performance the evaluators obtained directly from a simple content analysis of the newspapers. In my opinion, they developed measures of performance which were sensitive to community needs yet reflective of existing professional standards.

These measures, to be sure, can be improved upon. In the first place, the evaluators could easily have done more counting. Their measures were empirical, to be sure. They were based on observation of the press product. And they did employ criteria, leading to judgments. The judgments, however, were not stated in very precise terms. Numbers are precise. I think it is a shame the evaluators didn't rely on them more. They could have counted the number of locally produced editorials and presented their data on "canned" vs. locally-written editorials as a ratio. They could have counted the number of "puff" pieces. They could have counted the number of erroneous headlines or typesetting mistakes. That would have made the content analysis of the essays performed by my two colleagues and I unnecessary. And it would have helped us learn even more from the New England project.

The New England Survey measures of performance were global. They were based on the day-to-day operations of the newspapers to see how the papers performed under a variety of situations. By using a period of this length, the project designers avoided many of the problems of sampling inherent in the specific indices discussed earlier. But they also lost, quite simply, specificity.

Perhaps the ideal measure of performance would include both global indices of the sort constructed in the New England project and more specific measures of the type most often employed in bias analysis. In other words, news media coverage of a specific story or sample of stories could be examined in detail. Information obtained from these specific analyses could be combined with the more global information to better measure performance.

Perhaps the ideal measure of performance also would include information on the operation of the news institution in the past to guard against sampling problems. These data could be obtained from working journalists and others knowledgeable about the area's media. In other words, reputational measures of performance might be included as well.

I think community leaders and non-leaders alike have important information on press performance. Neither ought to be ignored as potential contributors to the ideal measure of performance.

The awards given the media institution under study--by professional groups and community organizations--also tell the evaluator something about the institutions under study.

In constructing our ideal performance measure, I think we need to be sensitive to the problem of a proper standard. There are sometimes objective criteria for inferring what the press ought to be covering. Funkhouser's (1973) analysis of trends in media coverage in the 1960s is particularly suggestive here. That analysis examined trends in media coverage of various issues during the period and compared those trends to available statistics on development of the real-world phenomenon itself. Coverage of the Vietnam War, for example, was compared with an objective indicant of the war's

magnitude--number of troops in Southeast Asian country--to see how well the average reflected the war's development. The conclusion Funkhouser reached was that media coverage and real events were far from perfectly matched.

The ideal measure of press performance, to summarize, would include information on the way specific news events are covered, information on the day-to-day operations of the press, as well as information on the media institution's past performance. The information would be precisely gathered and assembled. And it would make comparisons wherever possible to real world situations.

Measures of press performance are not sufficient for the kinds of theory testing I've called for here. Sensitive measures of appropriate independent variables--both from the community in which the press institution operates and of characteristics of the media organization itself--are still necessary. It seems, however, the press performance measures are the ones most in need of our attention at present.

The value of the kinds of theories which will develop from this empirical work, it seems to me, is that they can help change the stance of the press critic. Good theories allow for corrective prescriptions. That, it seems, to me, is what press criticism is all about.

## REFERENCES


Becker, Lee B., Randy Beam and John Russial, "Correlates of Daily Newspaper Performance," Journalism Quarterly, Spring 1978.

Filstead, William J., "Introduction," in W. J. Filstead (ed.), Qualitative Methodology (Chicago: Markham, 1970), pp. 1-11.

Funkhouser, G. Ray, "Trends in Media Coverage of the Issues of the '60s," Journalism Quarterly, 50:533-538 (1973).

Ghiglione, Loren, ed., Evaluating the Press: The New England Daily Newspaper Survey (Southbridge, Mass.: Published by the editor, 1973).

Johnstone, John W. C., Edward J. Slawski and William W. Bowman, The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

Rosengren, Karl Erik, "Bias in News: Methods and Concepts," paper presented to the International Communication Association, Berlin, West Germany, 1977.

Stempel, Guido H. III, "Media Evaluation: The State of the Art," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, Ottawa, 1975.

Wofford, Jerry C., Edwin A. Gerloff and Robert C. Cummins, Organizational Communication (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977).